

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## The Misses Johnston

There are hundreds upon hundreds of Scottish tunes composed for patrons in the late 18th and early 19th century, typically by a small professional musician class who catered to the upper crust of the society at the time, and who were kept busy composing melodies for the myriad balls and events that graced the yearly social calendar. Some of the melodies are significant, as were the individuals honoured in the titles; most, however, prove to be rather pedestrian melodies dedicated to a forgotten elite. Occasionally, in the course of my investigations into this “patronage pool” of tunes, I have the fortune to stumble upon a fascinating story of gifted individuals, and such is the story of Lucy Johnston and her aunt, Sophie, familiarly called “Suphy.” They were hardly alike, but both memorable.

The Johnston family hailed from the ancient parish of Hilton (later Whitsome), Berwickshire, in the Scottish Borders region just north of the River Tweed, not far from the northeastern-most county in England, Northumberland. There is an old Scottish saying, “Hilton kirk, baith narrow and mirk, and can only haud its ain parish folk,” which was uttered when a small house or room was crowded and it was difficult to move about. One can imagine that the church at Hilton was a very small structure, very dim or poorly illuminated, and that visitors could only be accommodated with difficulty. Perhaps, however, there was a pew reserved for the Johnstons, who were local, though minor, gentry. Lucy Johnston was born around the year 1760, daughter of Wayne (or Wynn) Johnston of Hilton-on-Merse, and one of six girls in a family of eleven. Her stature in life was enhanced by great physical beauty and an abundance of talent — by the time she was a young woman she had a reputation as a distinguished amateur musician and composer, and a graceful dancer. It was no wonder she became one of the celebrated belles of the Edinburgh Dance Assembly, and was frequently seen at concerts and dances. She must have enjoyed her independence, for she stayed single until she was in her early thirties, when, in 1793, she married Richard Oswald (1771-1841) of Auchincruive, heir to a large and prosperous estate in Ayrshire. Tragically, she died of tuberculosis four years later, after the birth of two daughters, despite Oswald’s efforts to contain the disease by taking her to Portugal where the climate was thought to be recuperative. Oswald, who was a British government contractor during the American Revolution, became a Member of Parliament for Ayrshire and did not marry again until a decade later; then to a daughter of the 12th Earl of Eglinton, a widow herself.

Such was Lucy’s reputation that she was honoured during her lifetime by several of the leading lights of the Scottish musical and literary world. Nearly three generations of Scottish musician-composers dedicated compositions to her, including the famous Niel Gow (1727-1807), who composed a reel, “Miss Johnston of Hilton.” His contemporary, Daniel Dow (1732-1783), an Edinburgh musician, composer, and teacher, composed a strathspey of the same



“Mrs. Richard Oswald (Lucy Johnston) of Auchincruive,”  
by Henry Raeburn.

name and published it when she was still in her teens. Robert “Red Rob” Mackintosh (1745-1807), an Edinburgh fiddler, composer, band-leader and music teacher (a young Nathaniel Gow was a student), dedicated a whole collection of dance music to her, his second, which included his compositions “Miss L. Johnston (of Hilton’s) Favourite Quick Step,” “Mrs. Oswald of Auchincruives New (Strathspey),” “Mrs. Oswald of Auchincruives Favorite Reel” and others named for her and her family. Finally, Niel’s son Nathaniel Gow (1763-1831) penned his own strathspey, “Miss Johnston of Hilton’s Fancy.” One of Lucy’s own compositions survives in the Gow’s 3rd Collection, later reprinted in *The Beauties of Niel Gow*. It is a beautifully crafted reel with a title that is a returned honor to the scion of the publishing family, called “Miss Lucy Johnston’s Compliments to Niel Gow.”

Scots national poet Robert Burns, like Lucy’s husband, was a resident of Ayrshire (actually, the family seat was nearby the poet’s home), and when the pair married he wrote some verses for the occasion. He much admired Lucy, and, after a change of heart about one of his loves, Jean Lorimer, he changed references in his poem “O Wat Ye Wha’s in Yon Toun,” substituting the name “Lucy” for his former flame “Jean.” He then sent the piece to Lucy Oswald, “that incomparable woman” as he called her, in May 1795.

O’ wat ye wha’s in yon toun,  
Ye see the e’ening sun upon?  
The fairest maid’s in yon toun,  
That e’ening sun is shining on.

Lucy also composed the air “Captain Cork’s Death,” to which Burns’ song “Thou lingering star with lessening ray” was originally set.

The second Miss Johnston is Lucy's aunt Suphy, who was probably the half-sister of Lucy's father. Suphy's own parents had some decidedly novel ideas about child rearing, at least when it came to her. Information about Suphy comes from two 19th century writers, Lady Anne Barnard, who sketched her in her book *Lives of the Lindsays*, and Henry Cockburn, who did the same in his posthumously published *Memorials of His Time* (1856). Suphy's unusual upbringing was ordained while she was still a neonate. One day, during the after-dinner conversation, the parental couple discussed the merits of formal education, which the squire maintained was highly overrated. Moreover, said he, institutional learning was unnecessary for one to make his or her way in the world. The Mrs. understood it was "a good thing for young people to know a little, to keep them out of harm's way," to which the squire countered that "a child who was left to Nature had ten times more sense, and all that sort of thing, when it grew up, than those whose heads were filled full of ginn-cracks and learning out of books." This argument prevailed, and they determined together "to make an experiment on the child she was to produce, and mutually swore an oath that it never should be taught anything from the hour of its birth, or ever have its spirit broken by contradiction." The Johnstons abided by their decision, producing what the locals called "Hilton's Natural Daughter," a child who was left to develop along her own fancies and without interference from schools, formal tutors, churchmen and such establishment figures. Not that learning was prohibited — on the contrary, Suphy was encouraged to pursue all that curiosity or whim dictated, and she took tutelage where she found it. Lady Barnard writes, "her taste led her to hunt with her brothers, to wrestle with stable-boys, and to saw wood with the carpenter. She worked well in iron, could shoe a horse quicker than a smith, made excellent trunks, played well on the fiddle, sang a man's song in a bass voice...." In fact, when she was resident in the same household with the young Balcarres, the middle-aged Suphy had a small forge built into a closet in her rooms. The butler taught her to read and write when she was nearly a grown woman, at her request, and she developed a passion for reading for the rest of her life. She was a great favourite with younger children, both recognizing kindred spirits, although she tended to distance herself when they "got into breeches." She was a fast friend of those she became attached to, but could make enemies as well, particularly as a result of her wit, her habit of speaking her mind, and her talent for mimicry.

She was remembered later in life by Henry Cockburn, who knew her socially and who noted that her eccentricities had scarcely changed at age sixty. Suphy was still single. "Her dress was always the same — a man's hat when out of doors and generally when within them, a cloth covering exactly like a man's greatcoat, buttoned closely from the chin to the ground, worsted stockings, strong shoes with large brass clasps. And in this raiment she sat in any drawing-room, and at any table, amidst all the fashion and aristocracy of the land, respected and liked. For her dispositions were excellent; her talk intelligent and racy, rich both in old anecdote, and in shrewd modern observation, and spiced with a good deal of plain sarcasm; her understanding powerful; all her opinions free, and very freely expressed; and neither loneliness, nor very slender means, ever brought sourness or melancholy to her face or her heart."

While we have no compositions or examples of Suphy's fiddling,

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her musical taste, at any rate, was remembered. Noted Scots writer Sir Walter Scott mentioned a song called "The Tod" in correspondence (c. 1826) with C.K. Sharpe as "An excellent song of old Soph. Johnston," and quoted Stanza 1 (the song can be found on the Digital Tradition website). Suphy had a habit of singing old tunes around the house, one of which was an old Scots air called "The Bridegroom Grat" (grat is Scots for "wept"). Lady Anne liked the tune and devised a new set of words for it, taking for a title the name of an old shepherd who was employed on her father's estate, and of whom the children were quite fond. She wove a tale of a young woman forced to wed "Auld Robin Gray," although she loved young Jamie. Lady Anne had her character endure a number of travails, such as Jamie going off to sea, her father breaking his arm, her mother becoming sick, her marriage, but the final sorrow was supplied by Lady Anne's younger sister, Elizabeth, who suggested "steal the cow, sister Anne", and the verse was completed. The song was an instant and huge hit, and one of the classic songs of the era, far outlasting its time. Lady Anne coyly declined to reveal its origins (it was mistaken by many for a traditional Scots song) and Suphy kept her secret. Eventually Suphy's melody for the song was supplanted by another melody composed by an Englishman, disparaged by many as an "inferior composition."

*[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called Ragged But Right (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia, "The Fiddler's Companion" (<http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers>). When not researching tunes, he spends as much time as possible playing fiddle in Irish music sessions.]*

## Miss Johnston of Hilton

Three staves of musical notation for the piece 'Miss Johnston of Hilton'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff begins with a treble clef, a sharp sign, and a common time signature. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with a repeat sign at the end of the first staff. The second and third staves continue the melody with similar rhythmic patterns.

## Miss Lucy Johnston's Compliments to Niel Gow

Three staves of musical notation for the piece 'Miss Lucy Johnston's Compliments to Niel Gow'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff features several trills, indicated by the 'tr' marking above the notes. The melody is more complex, involving sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The second and third staves continue the piece with similar rhythmic and melodic patterns.

## The Bridegroom Grat

Two staves of musical notation for the piece 'The Bridegroom Grat'. The music is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody is simple, consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a sharp sign, and a common time signature. The second staff continues the melody.